

GERMAN REACTIONS TO NAZI ATROCITIES

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ABSTRACT

Early in the re-education of the German people the military government attempted to develop a sense of collective responsibility for results of National Socialism, especially for atrocities in concentration camps. Detailed interviews indicate that, before the Allied occupation, Germans were aware of the existence and function of concentration camps, although they did not know the details or extent. Almost universally, the individual German projects responsibility upon the Nazi party or the S.S. There is little evidence that exposure to the facts was developing a sense of need for greater personal participation in political life among the traditionally unpolitical.

During the first months of the occupation, the Psychological Warfare Branch of the United States Army, being charged with the control of public information in Germany, undertook a campaign through Radio Luxembourg, the controlled German-language press, and special posters and pamphlets to acquaint the German people with the extent and nature of concentration-camp atrocities. The development of a sense of collective responsibility was considered a prerequisite to any long-term education of the German people. Later, editorial comment drew a distinction between those *legally* guilty of having directly committed atrocities and those *morally* responsible for having allowed National Socialism to come into being and for having tolerated its crimes.

Early in June, 1945, the author, while serving as an intelligence officer for the Psychological Warfare Branch, attempted to study the effect of one month of this campaign on German civilians residing in the American and British zones of occupation. The following sets forth his analysis and conclusions based on systematic interrogation of about a hundred civilians who represented a rough cross-section of the German population in the Western zone. The representativeness of the results can be demonstrated by the clear-cut findings, which did not alter with the inclusion of additional cases. Trained interrogators followed a standardized procedure in interviews, which were made in Cologne, Kassel, Erfurt, Koblenz, Kaiserslautern, Marburg, Heidelberg, and a number of villages.

Atrocity information ceased to be emphasized shortly afterward. Although major political developments have occurred in occupied Germany, the civilian opinion on German atrocities has, in the interim, undergone no significant changes.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ATROCITIES BEFORE ALLIED OCCUPATION

How much the German people knew of the conditions in concentration camps before Allied occupation is difficult to reconstruct. The mass of the German people have no interest in admitting more than a minimum knowledge. One must evaluate civilian claims of the knowledge in their possession in order to explain their reactions to Allied statements about atrocities.

Almost all Germans interrogated readily admitted that they at least knew of the existence of concentration camps in Germany before the arrival of Allied troops. Newspaper accounts continually told of the removal of enemies of the Reich to concentration camps. Jingles which spoke of their existence and warned of their significance came into common use as early as 1935. For example:

Lieber Herr Gott, mach mich stumm
Das ich nicht nach Dachau komm.

[Dear God, make me dumb
That I may not to Dachau come.]

Every community, except perhaps the very smallest, had members who were taken off to concentration camps; there is even evidence that it was Nazi policy to take a "sample"

from every community. Although returned inmates may have feared to talk about their experiences, they acted as a constant reminder to the German people of the existence of such institutions.

A great sector of the uncritical German people claim that, before Allied occupation, their notion of a concentration camp was a prison-like camp whose inmates were made to work for the public benefit and for their own rehabilitation. A twenty-eight-year-old German housewife said:

Of course, there were little rumors about the camps, but no one believed them. We thought that the prisoners might be working hard, that they might not be getting plenty of good food, and we even imagined some beatings or making the prisoners shout in chorus "Heil Hitler."

Many other Germans, though less naïve, claimed that they considered concentration camps as penal institutions in which German Jews, Communists, active political oppositionists, and criminals were sent. They thought that acts of brutality might possibly be committed in these camps but that these were the isolated actions of overzealous guards. Only a small minority profess to have had some knowledge of the details, but never of their actual extent. What information such individuals possessed was derived from private conversation with former inmates or their relatives or from foreign broadcasts. The isolated anti-Nazi who thought himself informed now frankly admits that his knowledge of the inner workings of concentration camps was most inadequate. Some informed Germans report that toward the end of the war they began to hear stories of widespread systematic murder in the East; most of these were circulated by German soldiers on leave. But, with isolated exceptions, they admit that such reports were largely discounted as foreign propaganda or as exaggerated rumors such as are frequent in wartime.

The extent of *professed* lack of knowledge of atrocities before Allied occupation can be seen in the detailed interrogation of seventy German civilians. Almost three-fourths stated that they had merely heard of the

existence of concentration camps and denied knowledge of any atrocities connected with them; a scattered few claimed never to have heard of concentration camps, flatly denied their existence, or merely refused to discuss the issue. About 15 per cent reported some vague impression that conditions were horrible but were unaware of their extent, admitting that they thought mistreatment the exception rather than the rule. There were only four individuals who thought themselves well informed, and, although Allied information has subsequently supplied them with a great many more facts as to the extent, their conception of concentration camps was quite accurate. Each was a highly specialized case. One was a former Social Democrat, who cited the Allied radio as a main source of information; another was a university professor of theology; a third had a relative in a concentration camp; and the fourth was an anti-Nazi bookseller with wide contacts.

There is good evidence that the German people were, in fact, ignorant of the details of concentration camps in Germany, although not to the degree which they profess. When, for example, a group of distinguished anti-Nazi university people who had been attached to the Max Weber circle in Heidelberg were asked how much the German people knew about concentration camps before 1939, they answered that the "average person knew that concentration camps existed but had no clear idea of the conditions in them." Nazi policy allowed only for the circulation of such facts as would keep the Germans informed of their existence and function and no more. Even returned inmates, according to their own statements and those of other informants, seldom circulated stories except in the most private circles. And the German people rarely learned that concentration camps were set up in occupied countries and that German concentration camps during the war were full of non-Germans who were systematically exterminated. On the part of most Germans, psychological repression, that is, the desire to avoid knowing the unacceptable

aspects of National Socialism, helped to maintain the vacuum.

IMPACT OF ALLIED INFORMATION ABOUT ATROCITIES

Disrupted communications did not prevent widespread dissemination of information about atrocities. Within four weeks after V-E Day, almost every German had had direct and repeated contact with our campaign to present the facts. When the subject of atrocities was raised, the stock answer was frequently, "Davon haben wir schon viel gehört" ("We have already heard a lot about this"). It appeared that the British Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Luxembourg had been the main sources, although Allied-published newspapers were widely mentioned. Allied posters were less frequently specified.

Almost everywhere one encountered acceptance of the facts, although frequently in an automatic fashion which bespoke a lack of genuine concern. Belief in our reports was in large part based upon the foundation of similar stories circulated by Germans who had returned from camps since Allied occupation. Inmates who returned from concentration camps before Allied occupation were also then for the first time fully relating their experiences. Belief in the veracity of Anglo-American propaganda, which had been built up over a long period, prepared them to accept our statements. In addition, there is a strong sentiment that Nazi propagandists, who have lied to and cheated the German population in so many respects, would have been likely to do the same in the matter of concentration camps.

Differences in willingness to accept Allied claims seemed to correspond to regional differences in nazification and to educational levels. West of the Rhine the facts seemed more readily accepted than in central Germany, where nazism penetrated more deeply. Those with a better educational background were more prone to accept our statements. An intensive study showed that Erfurt, a more nazified community than Kaiserslautern, produced many more skept-

tics, although it was closer to the town of Buchenwald.

BELIEF IN ALLIED STATEMENTS

Of seventy civilians interrogated, well over fifty professed that they believed the facts in the main. About fifteen professed belief with reservation; these reservations were largely about the extent of the atrocities. Only an isolated few displayed strong skepticism or outright disbelief. Naturally German civilians felt to some extent obliged as a matter of prudence to acknowledge our claims to an American officer, and their genuine belief is undoubtedly much less marked.

Despite the amount of information released at that time, many Germans were still poorly informed in detail. Specific information as to the number of camps and of people killed in them and as to living conditions was strikingly meager among all, even among some extreme anti-Nazis. Estimates as to the number killed were usually of some tens of thousands and only a few spoke of more than one hundred thousand. One or two Social Democrats were able to conjure up the phrase "millions."

Not only was there still wide ignorance about the exact facts about the concentration camps, but we encountered what appeared to be Nazi-planted rumors, designed to contradict Allied statements. Most popular was the story that Buchenwald was used for the burial of air-raid victims.

ABSENCE OF FEELINGS OF GUILT

The main problem of the investigation was to supply the answers to such questions as "Under what circumstances did the German people believe that atrocities were committed?" "Who is believed to have committed them?" "Who is to be held responsible, and how, in their opinion, can it be prevented from occurring again?"

Regardless of the amount and kind of knowledge of atrocities, there was an almost universal tendency to lay responsibility upon the Nazi party or the S.S. For example, of the seventy German civilians men-

tioned above, only three ascribed some element of guilt to the German people as a whole. It is important to note that they were among those who thought themselves to be well informed even before Germany was occupied. One of them was a professor of theology who ascribed to the German people a religious "hidden sense of guilt" which has not developed out of the failure of the German people to live up to their political responsibilities but is rather their guilt as the result of the acts of the rulers, even though they did not fully know what those rulers were doing and were unable to control them. The other two were highly politicized Marxists who attributed a moral guilt

All types of personalities and social classes presented this line with automatic regularity. The theory of innocence because of ignorance of the facts was not only widely held by the mass of the people but was offered as a "legal" argument by some intellectuals and students of jurisprudence. In order to buttress their argument, a few sophisticated civilians pointed to the past programs of B.B.C. and Radio Luxembourg, which had attacked the Nazi leaders as the "real war criminals."

DENIAL OF GUILT

The fact that almost universally some aspect of the Nazi leadership or the police system was held responsible for these atrocities does not mean that the German people, without exception, finds it necessary to condemn them as guilty. The fanatical Nazis, found more among police or semimilitary formations than among the civilian population, did not believe that these acts made anyone guilty of anything. In part this is the simple denial of any criminal, but there was also a genuine, thoroughly amoral, conviction that these acts were connected with the well-being of the Reich and the German people. Many a German civilian who was closely connected with the Nazi party or who benefited from its activities was more likely to hold the Nazi party, or rather a small element of it, guilty, in order to protect himself. Only to a secondary degree would he try to discount the facts and the moral implications of these misdeeds. It was rather among the German nationalists of the pre-Nazi variety that one found both a projection of guilt upon the Nazi party and, at the same time, an attempt to distract attention from atrocities as merely an inevitable by-product of war and the hatred which war stirs up. They sought to avoid both guilt for the atrocities and shame that these misdeeds were committed by Germans. Such persons pointed out that concentration camps had not only political prisoners but also many criminals who had to be handled roughly.

Many German women without deep political convictions of any sort also displayed

TABLE 1

Symbol	No.
Hitler.	4
Himmler.	9
Himmler and the S.S.	7
Leading Nazis (plus the Gestapo and S.S.)	9
Nazi party and Hitler.	10
Nazi government.	9
The government.	5

to the German people for failure to prevent the Nazis from seizing power. But both were convinced that, once the seizure of power was effected, the German people were helpless and could not be charged with responsibility.

Table 1 sets out the distribution of the symbols upon which guilt was projected by the other members of the sample who held specific ideas on the subject.

The main line of argument offered to prove their innocence was that the Nazis kept the facts from the German people and that, in any case, the ruthlessness of Nazi terror prevented anyone from opposing such deeds.

You Americans can hardly understand the conditions under which we were living. It was as if all of Germany were a concentration camp and we were occupied by a foreign power. We were unable to do anything to oppose them. What could one person do against that powerful organization?

this willingness to accept Nazi atrocities as the inevitable consequences of war; and, of course, they refused to pass any moral judgment on the war. The sufferings and destruction wrought as a result of air warfare were clearly the prime factors in developing this ethical indifference, not so much in the sense that German civilians actually made a practice of equating atrocities in concentration camps with air raids, but rather owing to apathy toward all phenomena outside the immediate personal sphere.

The only gap in the protective wall which Germans have erected to keep out all feelings of guilt about atrocities seems to be in connection with the mistreatment of German Jews. Here was a fact that even the most simple-minded German could not hide from his own consciousness. The Germans remembered the destruction of Jewish shops and synagogues, the systematic discrimination and final rounding-up and deportation of the Jews from their own community. Regardless of the success of Goebbels' propaganda in representing the "menace" of world Jewry to the Germans, some Germans were unable to feel any marked hatred against Jews of their own locality. Many deeply religious Germans are now profoundly sensitive in this respect. Some go so far as to lay the blame for the present difficulties of Germany on the mistreatment of the Jews. In particular, they asserted that the disaster of Stalingrad was the result of the Nazi policy toward the Jews. But even then, the sense of guilt did not usually carry with it a clear realization of the need for developing individual responsibility in order to prevent the recurrence of the same misdeeds; it is more a wish or hope for absolution.

Probing and discussion never produced any feelings of guilt. When a sense of shame was noted, it was a purely personal reaction without any feelings of coresponsibility. In the words of the famous psychiatrist, Dr. Ernst Kretschmer, who was interviewed in Marburg in connection with this survey, "feelings of submission toward the state, toward authority, were so great as to prevent the development of any sense of guilt." In

any case, the majority felt it was opportune to demand drastic punishment of those actually responsible, even at the hands of the former inmates.

It is particularly significant that Germans who had been exposed to Allied information about concentration-camp atrocities, or with whom the subject was discussed, seldom or never spontaneously offered to help rehabilitate the inmates. This reaction is consistent with reports that there was no humanitarian move by Germans in the neighborhood of the camps to assist in alleviation of the sufferings of inmates during the first days after occupation; assistance had to be ordered by military commanders or military government authorities.

Among more educated Germans there was a distinct feeling that the Allies might be overplaying the atrocity theme. They were quick to cite Nazi campaigns such as the exposé of the alleged Russian atrocities against captured Polish officers at Katyn and to warn us that overemphasis would produce the same skepticism as had developed toward Nazi propaganda. In large part this reaction was stimulated by a personal desire to forget the facts or to avoid responsibility for them. Former Centrists and Nationalists were especially outspoken. It seemed as if atrocities had injured their sense of national pride, since they could hardly imagine that Germans, Nazis or otherwise, could have committed such acts. Therefore, they made it their goal to close that incident and prove to the world once again that Germans were decent and honorable people. A few declared that the pictures of atrocities were so horrible that they could obviously not have been done by ordinary Germans; only the most fanatical S.S. members were capable of committing such acts.

POLITICAL REACTIONS

The confirmed anti-Nazi was prone to criticize the Allies for failing to draw a marked distinction between the guilty and the nonguilty in this campaign. They cited the fact that the concentration camps were

full of Germans as proof that some Germans had tried to resist or at least could hardly be included among the guilty. Taken in connection with the nonfraternization policy, they viewed our atrocity propaganda with apprehension, feeling that it would stand in the way of the development of a strong independent anti-Nazi movement inside occupied Germany. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the mass reaction, the better-educated German, as well as the anti-Nazi, was keenly concerned and interested in the political implications of our atrocity information.

Both anti-Nazis of the non-Communist variety and middle-class conservative or nationalist elements reacted to atrocity propaganda by contrasting it with the Russian-sponsored Radio Berlin, which, just at the time of these interrogations, was taking a "friendly" attitude toward the German people. Such individuals said that they were afraid of the effect which Russian propaganda was having on the "German masses." They usually started out by saying that B.B.C. and Radio Luxembourg constantly harped on atrocities and held all Germans responsible, while Radio Berlin was not so "unfriendly" to the German people in that it drew a distinction between the guilty and those who merely stood by. They usually added what they believed to be other marked differences in the propaganda of the West and the East, namely, that the Russians told of food being brought into Berlin and Dresden, while the Allies were emphasizing that the Germans would have to work hard or starve. The Russian radio spoke of fraternization and good will between the Russian Army of Occupation and the citizens of Berlin, while the Western Allies were conspicuously quiet on the subject. The people who drew attention to these differences generally added that they personally were completely skeptical and fearful of Russian intentions. But as friends of the Western Allies they claimed that they felt compelled to point out that the German masses were weak and uncritical and were therefore liable to be misled by Russian

propaganda. The implication was clear: the Western Allies must stop stressing collective guilt if they hoped to counteract Russian influence. Obviously, the argument is not without selfish motive as an inducement to better treatment.

A few extremely sophisticated Germans believed our propaganda to be too limited and extremely negative. It was too limited in that it did not show the relationship between the present atrocities and the history of National Socialism; that is, how, from the very earliest, National Socialism was dedicated to the negation of standards of human decency and justice and how, in accepting part of the National Socialist system, the German people had underwritten the whole of it. Our approach, they claimed, was purely negative, since all we attempted to do was to develop a sense of guilt; we offered no means by which the German people could atone for their guilt.

In at least one case, anti-Nazis spontaneously declared that the policy of the military government to distinguish sharply between party members and nonparty members was running counter to attempts to develop a sense of collective responsibility among the German people. Military government policy was leading many Germans who had traveled complacently on the Nazi bandwagon to consider that they would not have to bear any responsibility, since only Nazi party members were being punished. The Allies, these anti-Nazis held, must tell the German people that if party members are eliminated from public office, this does not mean that everyone else is free from responsibility for the misdeeds of National Socialism. They went on to declare that any policy of punishing war criminals would have the same effect and that ultimately the Allies would not be able to develop a German sense of collective responsibility. They did admit, however, that a distinction between moral and legal guilt would fit the political realities which the Allies have to face.

CHICAGO